

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7792

INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

AMEMBASSY LA PAZ

AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO

AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

AMEMBASSY ROME

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 7237

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SCUL, SHUM, PINT, AR

SUBJECT: CHURCH AND STATE: CATHOLIC BISHOPS REMAIN COMMITTED TO
QUIET DIPLOMACY

REF: A) BUENOS AIRES 3866; B) BUENOS AIRES 4617 NOTAL;

C) BUENOS AIRES 4875 NOTAL

1. SUMMARY. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, WHICH LAST MET
IN MAY, RECONVENED WEEK OF OCT. 25 TO CONSIDER CURRENT MATTERS OF CON

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CERN TO CHURCH. BISHOPS STRESSED NEED FOR PRAYER IN DDIFFICULT
TIMES, DECIDED TO ACCEPT CONTROVERSIAL "LATIN AMERICAN BIBLE"
WITH OBLIGATORY MODIFICATIONS FOR USE IN ARGENTINA, REFERRED
ONLY OBLIQUELY TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS, AND AVOIDED
ENTIRELY ANY COMMENT ON ECONOMIC SITUATION AFTER HEARING MIN OF
ECONOMY MARTINEZ DE HOZ. PREFERENCE FOR CONTINUED "QUIET
DIPLOMACY" WITH GOA ON CHURCH CONCERNS WAS MADE CLEAR. IMPORTANT
FACTORS IN CHURCH ATTITUDE REMAIN ITS RECOGNITION, ALONG WITH
MOST OBSERVERS, THAT LIKELY ALTERNATIVES TO PRESENT GOA WOULD BE
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WORSE, AND FACT THAT THERE HAVE BEEN NO MORE (TO PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE)

KILLINGS OR ASSAULTS (POSSIBLE EXCEPTION IS FATHER RICE CASE - SEE SEPTEL) UPON THE CLERGY BY THE SECURITY FORCES. UNLESS HUMAN RIGHTS AND/OR ECONOMIC SITUATION DETERIORATE SEVERELY, CHURCH WILL PROBABLY RESTRAIN ITS CRITICISM OF GOA AND CONTINUE ITS TACIT SUPPORT. END SUMMARY.

2. MOST OF ARGENTINA'S BISHOPS, INCLUDING ITS FOUR CARDINALS, MET IN 34TH EPISCOPAL ASSEMBLY OCT. 25 TO OCT. 30. THIS IS FIRST FULL MEETING OF BISHOPS SINCE MAY, AT WHICH TIME NEW OFFICERS WERE ELECTED, REPRESENTING A SHIFT FROM MIDLY RIGHT OF CENTER CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP TO THE DEAD-CENTER MODERATES WHO NOW CONTROL THE EXECUTIVE BOARD. ASSEMBLY PRODUCED FOUR DOCUMENTS: A PASTORAL LETTER TO BE READ IN ALL CHURCHES, A DECLARATION CONCERNING THE "LATIN AMERICAN BIBLE" WHICH HAS BEEN SUBJECT OF MUCH DISCUSSION AND CONTROVERSY IN PRESS, A VERY BRIEF COMMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS, AND A PROTOCOLARY TELEGRAM TO THE POPE.

3. PASTORAL LETTER: LENGTHY DOCUMENT IS ALMOST ENTIRELY DEVOTED TO NEED FOR AND IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER, COINED IN VERY GENERAL SPIRITUAL TERMS AND DIRECTED TO THE THEMES OF INDIVIDUAL SALVATION, DEDICATION AND FAITH OF CLERGY ITSELF, AND PEACE AND CONCORD IN THE COUNTRY. IN ONLY ONE SHORT REFERENCE DOES IT TOUCH UPON POLITICAL REALITIES. PRAYER IS URGED "FOR THOSE WHO HAVE THE DIFFICULT TASK OF GUARDING ORDER IN OUR BELOVED COUNTRY, SO THAT THEY MAY ALWAYS BE ABLE TO CARRY OUT THEIR DUTIES WITH CHARITY AND JUSTICE". THIS IS IMMEDIATELY BALANCED WITH THE REMAINDER: " WE CANNOT FORGET THOSE OF OUR BROTHERS WHO SEARCH FOR A NEW ORDER BY MEANS OF VIOLENCE AND SUBVERSION...WE PRAY TO GOD TO ILLUMINATE THEIR MINDS AND MOVE THEIR HEARTS SO THAT THEY SEEK OTHER PATHS FOR THE GOOD OF THE COUNTRY THROUGH CONCORD, LIBERTY AND PEACE."

4. LATIN AMERICAN BIBLE: ANNOTATED AND ILLUSTRATED EDITION OF BIBLE WHICH ORIGINATED IN CHILE WITH BLESSING OF A CHILEAN BISHOP, AIMED AT LATIN AMERICAN CATHOLICS, HAS BEEN SUBJECT OF RECENT WIDESPREAD DISCUSSION IN PRESS. SOME OF NOTES AND PHOTOGRAPHS CHOSEN TO ILLUSTRATE CONCEPTS DO, WITHOUT MUCH QUESTION, TEND TO IDENTIFY WITH THE RADICAL LEFT AND TO BE CRITICAL OF THE U.S. THE ARGENTINE BISHOPS IN THEIR STATEMENT FIRST ESTABLISHED FIRMLY THAT ONLY THE CHURCH IS COMPETENT TO JUDGE SUCH MATTERS, BUT THEN ACKNOWLEDGED THAT WHILE THE BASIC TEXT AND COMMENTARY ON THE

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BIBLE WAS ACCEPTABLE AND USEFUL, THERE WERE SOME RELATIVELY MINOR THINGS WHICH NEEDED REVISION. THUS THE NEW BIBLE IS TO BE ALLOWED TO CIRCULATE IN ARGENTINA, BUT ONLY WITH SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES OF THE BISHOPS WHICH WILL PUT IN PERSPECTIVE ITS CONTROVERSIAL POINTS, WHILE THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH CONSIDERS OVERALL REVISIONS.

5. HUMAN RIGHTS: IN PRESS CONFERENCE WHICH FOLLOWED ASSEMBLY,

SPOKESMAN RELEASED SHORT STATEMENT OF BISHOPS WHICH NOTED CONTINUING POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND RELATED PROBLEMS, AND "REITERATED" STATEMENTS OF MAY 15 (AFTER 33RD ASSEMBLY, REFTEL A), OF SEPT. 15 MEETING OF CHURCH LEADERS WITH JUNTA AT WHICH CHURCH MESSAGE TO JUNTA OF JULY (REFTEL B) WAS DISCUSSED, AND OF "VARIOUS EFFORTS" TO PRESENT TO THE AUTHORITIES, THROUGH "APPROPRIATE CHANNELS", INFORMATION AND SUGGESTIONS CONCERNING THIS AREA OF CONCERN.

6. NOVEL AND SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT DURING ASSEMBLY WAS INVITATION (EXTENDED BY CONSERVATIVE BISHOP TORTOLA OF PARANA AND VICAR OF THE ARMED FORCES) TO ECO OMY MINISTER MARTINEZ DE HOZ TO ADDRESS BISHOPS ON ECONOMIC SITUATION. MARTINEZ DE HOZ ACCEPTED WITH ALACRITY AND IN SESSION OF OVER TWO HOURS REPORTEDLY MADE STRONG CASE THAT WEAKENING OF HIS ECONOMIC POLICIES TO ACCOMMODATE CONCERNS, HOWEVER LEGITIMATE, OVER HARDSHIPS, WOULD BE WRONG. SOME BISHOPS HAD RAISED CONCERNS OVER ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS, AND EVIDENTLY HOPED FOR ASSEMBLY ENDORSEMENT OF CALL FOR WAGE INCREASES, ETC. BISHOP TORTOLA'S CALL FOR MARTINEZ DE HOZ, AND THE MINISTER'S RENOWNED PURSUASIVENESS, APPARENTLY CONVINCED THE ASSEMBLY TO LEAVE THE SUBJECT ALONE, AND NO REFERENCE TO IT WAS MADE IN STATEMENTS MADE PUBLIC AFTER THE MEETING.

7. COMMENT. UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE FIRMLY "NONALIGNED" CARDINAL PRIMATESTA, THE BISHOPS HAVE NOT MOVED FROM THE POSITION ENDORSED LAST MAY. DESPITE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE "LIBERAL" AND "CONSERVATIVE" BISHOPS WHICH ARE KNOWN TO EXIST IN THE ARGENTINE CHURCH, AND WHICH SURFACE FROM TIME TO TIME, THE DEGREE OF UNITY HAS BEEN IMPRESSIVE. GREAT STRAINS WERE PLACED UPON THE POLICY OF NON-CONFRONTATION WITH THE GOA IN JULY AND AUGUST, WHEN SEVERAL PRIESTS WERE KILLED BY THE SECURITY FORCES AND OTHERS WERE DETAINED. WE KNOW THAT CHURCH LEADERS COMPLAINED BITTERLY AND WITH STERN WARNINGS TO THE GOA, BUT THEY DID IT PRIVATELY. ALTHOUGH A FEW PRIESTS CONTINUE TO SUFFER ARREST FOR REAL OR SUSPECTED "SUBVERZ-
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SIVE" ACTIVITIES, AND A FEW FOREIGN PRIESTS HAVE BEEN EXPELLED, THE SITUATION IN THE LAST TWO MONTHS APPEARS TO HAVE IMPROVED. TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, NO MORE CLERGY HAVE BEEN KILLED. THE QUIET MAY BE IN SOME PART ATTRIBUTED TO THE FACT THAT MANY CLERGY ARE FRANKLY FRIGHTENED AND ARE AVOIDING EVEN THE APPEARANCE OF ANTI-GOA ACTIVITIES OR OPINIONS. MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, THE CHURCH IS FACING THE SAME DILEMMA AS MOST OTHER OBSERVERS WHO REGARD THE MILITARY REGIME AS LESS THAN IDEAL FOR ARGENTINA:
WHAT REALISTIC ALTERNATIVE IS THERE AT THIS STAGE, AND WOULD NOT ANY ALTERNATIVE, SUCH AS ANOTHER GROUP OF GENERALS AT THE TOP, QUITE PROBABLY BE EVEN LESS DESIRABLE?

8. THE CHURCH, THEN, HAS CHOSEN TO AVOID OPEN CONFRONTATION, TO HOPE FOR IMPROVEMENT, TO USE PRIVATE PRESSURE UPON THE PRESENT GOA TO REDUCE HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AND AMELIORATE ECONOMIC HARD-

SHIPS, AND TO PRESERVE UNITY AMONG THE BISHOPS. UNLESS THERE IS A
DRAMATIC WORSENING OF THE SITUATION, THE CHURCH IS UNLIKELY TO
TAKE A LEADING ROLE IN OPPOSITION TO THE GOA OR TO JOIN OTHER
INTEREST GROUPS (SUCH AS POLITICAL PARTIES OR ORGANIZED LABOR)
WHICH MIGHT WISH TO ENLIST THE CHURCH IN THEIR OWN EFFORTS.
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